



# NEWS

*from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

November 25, 1998

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## **INTERNATIONAL SEABIRD CONSERVATION EFFORT SHOULD REDUCE BYCATCH**

An international plan of action (IPOA) for reducing the incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries was approved last week in Rome, Italy, by member countries of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The plan, approved October 29, establishes concrete and specific steps to improve the conservation of 61 species of seabirds known to be killed by taking baits from commercial longline fishing gear.

"The steps approved by the FAO have the potential to reduce the bycatch of seabirds by up to 80 percent or more at national, regional, and global levels," Jamie Rappaport Clark, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said. "This action plan will help participation countries determine the extent of seabird mortality and provide them with practical suggestions for preventing many of these deaths."

Longline fishers deploy up to 35,000 hooks per vessel every day. Albatrosses, petrels, shearwaters, gulls and skuas, whose populations may be in decline, steal bait from these longlines and sometimes get tangled in the lines, leading to their deaths. Unfortunately, very little is yet known about the incidental mortality of seabirds in most of the world's longline fisheries. To respond to this situation, Japan and the United States proposed an expert consultation during the 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Committee on Fisheries in March 1997, which led to the plan's creation.

The IPOA-SEABIRDS calls for the following specific actions:

- Each country with a longline fishery is encouraged to conduct an assessment of their fishery to determine if a seabird bycatch problem exists. If a problem does not exist, each country is asked to periodically reassess its decision, particularly when fisheries are expanded or when a new longline fishery is developed.
- Countries are also asked to report their progress to FAO biennially under authority of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.
- Each country whose assessment determines a problem is encouraged to implement its National Plan of Action (NPOA-SEABIRDS) no later than February 2001.

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- Each country is further encouraged to reassess its NPOA at least every 4 years. FAO will provide technical assistance through a list of global technical experts and through a computer database and Internet information website.

Member countries also approved by consensus a list of suggested guidelines designed to help countries conduct their assessments of seabird bycatch. Included in the list were recommendations pertaining to reviews of fleet size, fishing techniques used, fishing effort, seabird population status, annual seabird bycatch, existing seabird bycatch monitoring and the use of mitigation measures and their effectiveness in reducing seabird bycatch.

Because of the efforts of the U.S. Delegation, and strong support from the delegations of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Sudan and Tonga, the document also lists optional technical and operational fishing measures that are probably useful for reducing seabird bycatch. These include:

- further weighting of lines to increase sink rates,
- reducing the exposure of baited hooks to seabirds,
- thawing baits to overcome buoyancy problems,
- increasing sink rates by use of line-setting machines or below-the-water chutes,
- deploying bird scaring devices,
- modifying hooks,
- setting lines at night,
- reducing vessel attractiveness to seabirds,
- area and seasonal closures, and
- releasing live birds.

"This is the first global plan of action specifically designed to reduce the bycatch of seabirds in commercial fishing gear, and it sets an extremely important precedent for international bird conservation," said Dr. Albert Manville, head of the U.S. Seabird Delegation and a member of the U.S. Delegation to the FAO Consultation in Rome. "The victory is a win-win situation for the birds, for wildlife conservation, and for the commercial fishers who now can potentially catch more fish," Manville added.

Also represented on the Seabird Team were Kim Rivera, a seabird specialist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, Juneau, Alaska; Kent Wohl, a seabird specialist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska; and Gerald Winegrad, a policy specialist with the American Bird Conservancy in Washington, DC. The U.S. Delegation was headed by chief negotiator Terry D. Garcia, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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